

Laying Down the Law

William "Bill" Mims has dedicated the past 17 years of his career to serving the commonwealth of Virginia. Now, he leads the state's top legal office, too.

Mims, JD '84, was elected state attorney general by Virginia's General Assembly in February. Chief deputy attorney general since 2006, Mims succeeds Robert McDonnell, who resigned after deciding to run for governor.

"I love public service," says Mims, who also served in the Virginia House of Delegates from 1992 to 1997 and in the Virginia Senate from 1998 to 2005. "The opportunity to assist people in a number of ways has been remarkable."

As attorney general, Mims leads about 300 attorneys and staff members who provide legal advice to state agencies and the governor; serve as consumer counsel for the people of the commonwealth; defend criminal convictions on appeal; and defend Virginia laws when challenged on constitutional grounds.

On a typical day, Mims says, "I spend more than half my time at my desk working on decision memoranda, briefs, and other matters that one would handle in a typical law firm. I also spend considerable time around the state, being the public face for the Office of Attorney General."

The office's current top concerns include utility reregulation, dealing with the legal issues surrounding the Virginia Tech tragedy, and promoting mental health law reform, he says.

Virginia utilities, Mims explains, have been deregulated for a decade and are now undergoing reregulation. When Mims was chief deputy attorney general, the office guided the General Assembly through major negotiations and recommended legislation. Initial rate cases are now under review, with Mims' office in the role as Virginia consumer counsel. "These cases will have an impact on the household budgets of millions of Virginians," he says.

In addition to the utilities cases, Mims and his staff have been heavily involved in managing legal issues associated with the shootings at Virginia Tech on April 16, 2007, in which a deranged student shot and killed 32 people and wounded others on the college campus.

"From the moment that occurred until now, it has required the focus of our office. At one time we had 25 attorneys working on various aspects of the response to this tragedy," Mims says. As chief deputy attorney general he was tasked with that effort and has overseen 48 liability cases against the university for wrongful death or serious injury, of which 46 have been settled. Office attorneys are defending the final two cases.

The shooting gave rise to another issue that Mims and his staff have also been working on: mental health law reform.

"We're partnering with Gov. Tim Kaine and his staff to reform mental health laws," Mims says, reforms that include better sharing of information between mental health providers and safety officials, and changing who can be considered a threat.

Mims' service will end in January 2010, when he has completed former Attorney

William Mims, JD '84, is Virginia's attorney general. He says the best part of the job is "working with extraordinary, dedicated career public servants who also are first-rate lawyers."

General McDonnell's four-year term.

Before starting at the Office of Attorney General, Mims served in the Virginia House of Delegates and in the Virginia Senate; during his time in the legislature, he also worked as an attorney in Leesburg. Going from lawmaker to chief deputy attorney general was a significant transition, he says.

"When I began, the biggest challenge was managing a bigger organization than I had managed previously. When I was chief of staff to U.S. Rep. Frank Wolf, I managed a staff of 20. I learned quickly that the same principles apply," says Mims, a Harrisonburg native who now lives in Richmond. "It was a significant transition but was also quite satisfying. I give enormous credit to Bob McDonnell; He came in determined that this would be a premier public law firm and we would seek excellence in everything we did."

Mims knew he wanted to pursue a career in law and politics when he was exposed to the political process in high school and then became involved in student politics in college. He later attended GW Law School as a night student.

"It was a wonderful experience," says Mims, who remembers his first GW Law class held at 20th and H streets in a large townhouse turned into an office. By the time he graduated, "the first phase of the new Law School was completed, and I finished classes in an exceptional new facility." Mims also remembers extraordinary professors and how he benefited from their teaching, recalling classes taught by Mary Cheh, Luize Zubrow, Roger Schechter, and visiting lecturer Jacob Stein, LLB '48.

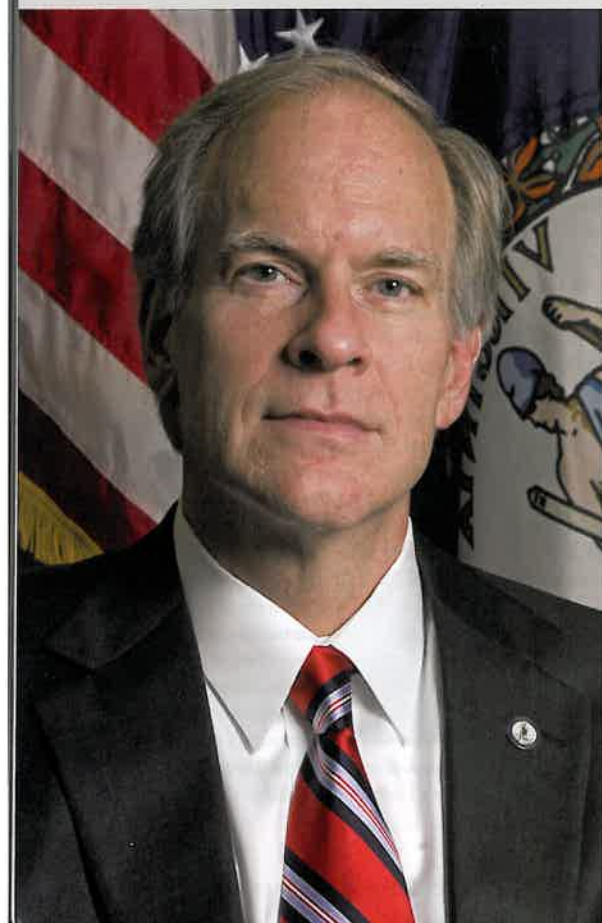
After finishing his JD at GW Law, Mims completed an LLM at Georgetown University but continued to take classes from GW, developing an interest in employment law.

"I took two classes in employment discrimination at GW that really helped shape my path as a lawyer," Mims says.

While at GW Law, he worked as deputy legislative director for former Sen. Paul Trible (R-Va.) before he became chief of staff to U.S. Rep. Frank Wolf (R-Va.). Wolf was a mentor to Mims. He taught Mims about public service, and Mims says he was "able to see the extent that one person can make a difference."

"That's what really set me on the path I eventually took."

—Carrie Madren



COURTESY OF THE OFFICE OF THE ATTORNEY GENERAL